

"World Class" teamwork is not conditional upon circumstances

By Jim Eisenhart, President of Ventura Consulting Group

To what do the vast majority of general contractor's, owners, designers, and construction manager's attribute extraordinary project success and great teamwork? Invariably we get one or more of the following responses:

- We had good people
- The plans and specs were clear and complete
- The conditions/weather/third parties, etc. were favorable
- We all got along and didn't have any major disputes
- It was a negotiated job (assumption = you can not have a "World Class" team on a low-bid job)
- We utilized IPD, BIM, LEAN, Design-Build, design assist, etc
- There was a crisis/emergency which brought us together
- We all communicated well
- We trusted one another

Maybe, just maybe, it doesn't require any of the above with the exception of the last two. But what's the problem with saying 'good communication'? "Good communication" is, we say essentially meaningless. It's too vague and open to interpretation. Communicate about what? When? By whom? In what format? The interpretation of "Good communication" to one individual can differ vastly from that of another on a construction project. It's all too tempting to compare teamwork on a construction project to that in a marriage but I can't resist indulging myself here. In one marital relationship counseling session the wife asserted that yes, she did communicate that something was wrong in the relationship. When pressed to be more specific she said "when I had to repeatedly ask him to pick his clothes up off the floor".

In too many construction projects we're asking one another to "pick their clothes up off the floor" and it does not make much of a difference. It is kind of like the owner asking the contractor to for 'no surprises'. Or, the contractor requesting the owner to expedite change orders. Good intentions yes, but they do not necessarily result in action let alone get close to what we will describe as "World Class" teamwork.

How about trust? Whole books have been written about it. One of the better and more recent being Steven Covey's *The Speed of Trust*. Trust we will assert is a both a consequence of and a prerequisite for "World Class" teamwork.

By the way, I would not want to suggest that not having any of the other attributes listed above on your project would not be desirable. But consider the possibility that you can have a great or what we term "World Class" project team without one or more of the above -- for the time being excluding 'good communication' and 'trust'. Preposterous you say, well let's look at some projects that did it.

The fallacy of needing good site conditions

Consider the 700mn+ Benicia Martinez Bridge project completed in 2008. As the project began, it quickly became apparent to both Caltrans and the contractor, Kiewit Pacific, that the pile driving process was killing fish. Not a good thing in the bay area. Not only that, but the geo technical conditions were not anything like what the plans said they would be. The result? They negotiated a 300mn+ change order that also pushed the completion date out a full year and a half. Conventional wisdom would suggest that this doomed the project to failure.

But wait, should those circumstances (unknown site conditions) be held against the project team? We say no, rather they should be accountable for *how* they dealt with them *as a team*. And they dealt with them very openly, collaboratively and made the very best out of what was a very 'poor hand' to begin with. The project ended winning a Marvin Black Award for partnering excellence and Bridge & Highway's "Bridge of the Year". As Kevin Mitchell, Senior Project Manager for Kiewit put it: "Without extraordinary collaborative efforts, the numerous challenges faced by Kiewit and Caltrans would have undoubtedly brought project to a halt, and to this day would the project would not be complete".

The lesson? A 'World Class' team distinguishes between their circumstances or challenges on a job and then how they deal with those circumstances as a team. And above all, don't beat yourselves or your teammates up for circumstances you could not have truly prevented but do work to mitigate them as a team.

The fallacy of needing complete/accurate design

How does a "World Class" team deal with incomplete and/or inaccurate plans/specs? A "World Class" team we say begins with the assumption that there is no such thing as a fully complete and accurate design -- with all due respect to the designers. Or, if this was a expectation, as many a designer has told us, the owner would not want to pay for it.

When a design deficiency is encountered, the team acknowledges it openly and verbally and not with the intent to place blame or take advantage of the situation. Rather, it is expressed in the context of our, the team's, common purpose. An example might be, "the state of the plans relative to the foundation, may hinder our ability to achieve our

team goal of completing this project early (on time). How can we as a team deal with that on a go forward basis?". So the team might develop an approach to complete and/or "clean" the design as a team to stay ahead of and support *their* construction goal. This often involves bringing designers 'on site' for the duration it takes to complete the design -- maybe even the whole job. Any cost issues due to design deficiencies are dealt with later, if necessary, between owner and designer.

The fallacy of needing sufficient resources/funding

What about a lack of resources/funding? As one experienced project manager told me the other day. "I would once like to work on a high profile job that has no problem with funding". How many of you have worked on a job where funding is unlimited or not an issue? OK now that we are back in the real world, let's talk about how "World Class" teams deal with insufficient funding and resources.

An example. On the First Presbyterian Church (Ronald Reagan's old church) in Bel Air, California rehabilitation project team members first of all openly acknowledged to one another that there would be changes. Then, as a team, 'guestimated' their expectations in each category: unknown site conditions; owners ads; and, design deficiencies. The result? 15% of contract value. With this the Executive Director of the church threw up his hands and said "there's no way we can afford that". So they immediately, again as a team, initiated an aggressive scope reduction and value engineering process to bring expected costs in line with available resources.

How about resources? On the Victorville United States Penitentiary project the general contractor, Hensel Phelps, found themselves critically short of project engineers. They acknowledged this with their team and, as Steve Kimball, project director for Hensel Phelps put it, "We 'drafted' 3 of our estimators from our regional office and sent them out there for a couple weeks to work as PE's. You do what it takes with what you've got". But, as we will see, most WCT's look first at optimizing the resources they have at hand with the assumption that through true "World Class" teamwork they can do much more with less.

How about delays due to weather, third parties and regulatory agencies? Again, the potential impact is acknowledged well upfront by the team as a team. They are prioritized relative to their impact on team goals. The project team looks at their collective ability to then prevent and/or mitigate the impact. Sometimes this may require going up their management ladder and using their 'silver bullets' to deal with the other entity. This is a 'last resort' but with the full project team behind the request and how it might impact 'our' goals, the request is much more compelling to senior management and the third party. True "World Class" teams 'own the game completely' as we say. Or, as Bob Fouty, Vice President with Archer Western/Walsh put it on a Phoenix Valley Metro Rail light rail project "We're going to complete this job 4 months

early. No excuses". From that point forward on the job he was known as "No excuses Bob".

Another approach? On large transit projects with a duration of over 4-5 years there are dozens of agencies, municipalities, districts, residential and commercial entities to deal with. How do you manage that 'cast of thousands'? Dennis Mori, Project Executive with Los Angeles MTA's Eastside Extension project invited them to quarterly partnering sessions well prior to their active involvement on the job. "We were able to proactively engage with them not just around their interests but also in such a way as to have them support overall project success".

The fallacy about not having issues/disputes

So how about issues or disputes? We say it is naive to suggest that you will not have disputes, misunderstandings, mistakes, different interpretations on a construction project. If you start with that assumption, the challenge now becomes how do we prevent them where we can and mitigate the impact of those we can not and, above all, *keep the job moving*. This, in effect, makes it OK for individuals to agree to disagree at each level within the project hierarchy and then elevate it quickly, without ill will, rancor or personal animosity.

On Caltrans 500mn West Bay Approach project with Tutor Saliba Corp. anchoring the west end of the new San Francisco Bay Bridge, the project team utilized their Disputes Review Board. In other words, they agreed to disagree all the way up their respective 'resolution ladders'. How can Mike Forner, head of the Toll Bridge Program, then call this job "The best project on the entire Toll Bridge Program"? Well, the fact that they followed their dispute resolution protocol, kept the job moving, still trusted one another, bore one another no ill will or animosity, and worked together collaboratively while these issues were being dealt with. We call that a very mature "World Class" team.

The fallacy about needing a PDM other than design-bid-build

Now how about the assumption that the project delivery method (PDM) and/or construction methodology a project chooses to implement will necessarily bring forth "World Class" teamwork? Now, we'll grant you that design-build; pre-selection; design-assist; employment of BIM/IPD and the application of LEAN project management might enhance the probability of 'world class' teamwork vis-a-vis a pure low bid project. But they by no means guarantee or ensure it. We became involved in one major hospital renovation project in San Francisco a couple years back that was employing LEAN construction and had gone 'south' in big way. Part of the problem was that they could not agree on a common definition of LEAN.

Likewise, Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) is a powerful teambuilding tool. About one half of the projects we are currently involved with employ IPD in some form.

As Barry Thalden, CEO of Thalden, Boyd, Emery architects out of St. Louis put it "IPD is a project delivery approach that integrates all key members of the project team from the very initial phases of the project. A major benefit of this method is that it reduces conflict by encouraging all parties to work collaboratively."

We agree. IPD, and we will talk more about IPD/BIM in later chapters, creates, in effect, a new team. IPD/BIM are transformative tools that can significantly enhance construction project teamwork. Metaphorically speaking it much like being able to execute a 'fast break' offense on your basketball team. It requires, and can also bring forth, an extraordinary level of coordination and teamwork. In our view, the utilization of an IPD/BIM process both helps create the opportunity for and benefits from truly "World Class" project teamwork. It is, what biologists might say, a symbiotic relationship.

An effective IPD/BIM process can influence key, but by no means all components of overall project success. On a large, 100+mn learning center for the Los Angeles School District the IPD/BIM process was acknowledged as highly successful yet the project team still was mired in major issues with respect to expediting change orders, dealing with third parties and final acceptance.

"Hey, we're doing design-build, IPD and BIM. Isn't that enough?" Or the fallacy that our construction methodology/PDM will, in and of itself, ensure World Class teamwork.

Nor should "World Class" teamwork be viewed as something more that needs to be 'bolted on' to a project. World Class teamwork, successfully implemented, should seamlessly integrate into and facilitate your selected PDM and construction methodologies. It is similar to how a new head football coach can step into a losing team that basically utilizes all the techniques, plays and has, for the most part, similar talent that the winning teams execute with and totally transform their performance.

In his new book, *When Giants Fail & Why Some Companies Never Give In*, author Jim Collins points out that one of the primary causes of organization failure is the constant searching for a 'silver bullet' or the latest management gimmick that will make things better fast. Organizations, whether they be contractors, designers or owners who expect new project delivery methods, construction methodologies, contractual models to, in and or themselves, eliminate risk and bring forth extraordinary or 'World Class' project teamwork and results are misguided. World Class teamwork is not a gimmick, technique or methodology. Rather it is a very fundamental, and specific, way of relating to one another that transcends the type of project, PDM or construction methodology.

To somewhat simplify it, your intent and behaviors -- and that of your colleagues -- on a project counts for a lot more than the technique, PDM, or processes you employ. If your primary intent on a construction project is to minimize/transfer your risk let or just 'win/prevail' as a individual or organization, even with the most effective and sophisticated project management tools and methodologies, you will never achieve 'world class' teamwork. If, on the other hand, your commitment is to truly achieve extraordinary overall project success and 'WCT' with your fellow stakeholders then newer PDM's and technologies can enhance and benefit from a commitment to WCT. They can enable you to, as Jim Collins puts it, build a 'stronger, better flywheel' on your project.

By the way, one big advantage of 'design-bid - build' or low bid projects? You certainly do not take collaboration let alone 'world class' teamwork for granted and you are more willing to engage in a formal process to facilitate it.

The fallacy of "You really gotta have good people"

OK, now how about the "Big one". That being, "you really have to have good, qualified and trustworthy people to have a "World Class" team". On a 200mn+ water treatment plant that is still underway the team started with defining common goals and made very specific personal commitments to action to support those goals. Well, a couple of weeks after the workshop, the GC's project manager went to the third party CM's on-site manager and asked (no letters, e-mails, please) him if there was a reason he wasn't following through on the commitments he made. The CM replied in effect "I'm going to do things my way". Well, the PM did what you're supposed to do in "World Class" teams, he elevated the issue to his boss, the regional vice president for the GC. He followed protocol and brought this up verbally to his counterpart with the CM firm. The CM manager replaced his on-site manager presumably after having a talk with him.

Now we're not advocating replacing people wholesale but if individuals do not play as team players per their mutually agreed upon teamwork protocol and every effort is made to help them do so, then maybe that's what's necessary. Jim Sealey, head of the Federal Bureau of Prisons Construction branch would, in his opening remarks at initial partnering workshops, say "If any of my people aren't partnering or team players, they're gone". And he backed this up on more than one occasion. And guess what, the general contractor principals on his jobs invariably articulated and adopted the same policy with their people.

Adversity can breed teamwork

Here's another thought. That the worse the circumstances, the easier it is to build a "World Class" team. Huh? We couldn't understand this for a while until Josh Randall,

Vice President for Tutor Saliba explained it to us during the Los Angeles METRO 'Red Line' projects of the late 90's when the city, press, and residents were openly against the projects and even Los Angeles MTA senior management, which was a revolving door at the time, had a very dysfunctional organization culture. "It's a consequence of a "Circle the Wagons" effect, Josh said. "We all at the project level quickly realized that the only way these jobs would be successful would be if we came together at the project level as a true, high performance team. We succeeded in spite of the circumstances or maybe because of them." By the way, do not use a "circle the wagons" metaphor with native Americans. We made the mistake (once!) of doing that on a major tribal casino project!

In fact, one might go so far to state that you can't have a "World Class" team without limits, constraints and challenges. Adversity actually strengthens world class teams.

So let's see what "World Class" teamwork really requires.

- a. A genuine commitment by senior management of all major stakeholders to support, by word and action, working together on a 'go forward' basis on a process of common goals, teamwork, open, direct verbal dialogue and personal integrity.
- b. A common, mutually agreed upon set of measurable team goals that everyone freely commits to. These goals must minimally acknowledge, but not be limited by, the project's legal and contractual obligations and the specs.

With the above should be an explicit understanding among all team stakeholders that distinguishes between what they can and should hold themselves accountable for as a team and what is 'outside their domain' to influence. and thus not be held accountable for. The latter should include everything that has gone on *before* their commitment to strive toward 'World Class' teamwork.

- c. A clear, mutually agreed upon protocol for handling disputes and issues that keep the job moving and that makes it OK to 'agree to disagree'.
- d. A formal quantitative and qualitative process to review their performance, as a team, against the above over the duration of the job and to take corrective action, if necessary.